

The Black Widow

Harper Paperbacks

By Daniel Silva

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Introduction

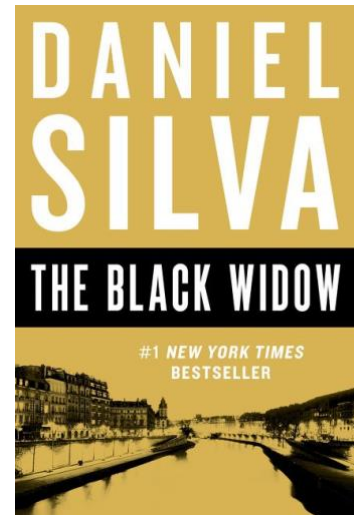
#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Daniel Silva delivers another spellbinding international thriller—one that finds the legendary Gabriel Allon grappling with an ISIS mastermind.

Gabriel Allon, the art restorer, spy, and assassin described as the most compelling fictional creation "since Ian Fleming put down his martini and invented James Bond" (*Rocky Mountain News*), is poised to become the chief of Israel's secret intelligence service. But on the eve of his promotion, events conspire to lure him into the field for one final operation. ISIS has detonated a massive bomb in the Marais district of Paris, and a desperate French government wants Gabriel to eliminate the man responsible before he can strike again.

Acclaimed novelist Daniel Silva has thrilled, entertained and educated readers with eighteen thoughtful and gripping spy novels featuring a diverse cast of compelling characters and ingenious plots that have taken them around the globe and back—from the United States to Europe, Russia to the Middle East. From its shocking opening to its explosive denouement in Washington, D.C., *The Black Widow* reveals itself as Silva's most timely and powerful novel yet. Following the success of his smash hit *The English Spy*, this electrifying thriller showcases Silva's consummate skill and brilliant imagination, and is sure to be a must read for his multitude of current and future fans.

Questions for Discussion

1. Hannah Weinberg was described as a "memory militant" in her efforts to fight anti-Semitism in France. What does this mean? Why is historical memory an important part of cultural evolution? What other qualities made Hannah so helpful to Gabriel Allon and the Office?
2. Discuss the role of art and restoration in the book. How do they resonate against the backdrop of terrorism? Despite its fiction, what relevant connotations result from the van Gogh painting, *Marguerite Gachet at her Dressing Table*, in Hannah's possession?



3. Throughout the book, the reader meets characters involved in terrorism and the war on terrorism. How do their personal histories play a role in the choices they make? What is the “human factor” in the war on terror?
4. Safia Bourihane, the Black Widow, grew up in the banlieue Aulnay-sous-Bois, a “crime-ridden public housing estate.” What is it about such neighborhoods that might invite or foster violence? How might living conditions and even neighborhood geography be related to terrorism?
5. What qualities and experiences—origin, personality, profession, etc.—does Dr. Natalie Mizrahi have that make her “a gift from the intelligence gods” in the Office’s operational hunt for *Saladin*?
6. What must she overcome and learn to serve as “Leila”?
7. How is it that Natalie, a French Jew, “had much in common with the Palestinian woman she would soon become”?
8. What complexities exist in the important relationship between Natalie and Dina Sarid?
9. Beyond “the same sad tale” of disillusionment, poverty, and political instability as motivations for jihadists, what motivates the “few bright minds...from good families in the upper ranks of the global jihadist movement”?
10. Consider the name *Saladin*. What historical significance does it have? In what ways is the modern incarnation similar or different?
11. What is the state of Gabriel Allon’s life as the novel begins? How might he be different, as Chiara has recently given birth to their twins, Irene and Raphael? Of what significance might it be that he is restoring Caravaggio’s *Nativity with St. Francis and St. Lawrence*, and that it’s “the most damaged canvas he had ever seen”?
12. Discuss the role of art restoration in Gabriel’s character. How does restoration help Gabriel? How did Gabriel’s abilities as “a natural restorer” help repair political relationships between the Office and both the CIA and Britain’s SIS?

13. Why might Gabriel have been unable to resume his work as a fine art painter after his violent work in the Office's Operation Wrath of God?
14. How are Gabriel and Uzi Navot—Ari Shamron's "trusted heirs of the service"—similar and different?
15. Gabriel and Chiara discuss Arnold Toynbee's claim that "there were two great pivot points in the world...the Oxus-Jaxartes Basin" and Syria. Why are these such critical and powerful regions?
16. Discuss the roles of the different members of Gabriel's team. How do you relate to them? Do you have a favorite, and if so, why?
17. What does it mean that Dina Sarid serves as the Office's "conscience and institutional memory"?
18. Discuss the role of Black Widows in terrorism. As Dina asks, "why have more than five hundred young Western women joined the ranks of ISIS"? What in all the brutal violence might appeal to "impressionable girls" as well as women "much more educated than the men who have joined ISIS"?
19. What do the many literary allusions—Proust, Dumas, Sartre, etc.—add to the novel?
20. Consider Natalie's profound decision to save or kill *Saladin* when serving as "Leila," his nurse. What motivations and obligations are at war in her? What would be the consequences of each option? How does this situation go beyond the "ethically fraught scenarios" she experienced as a doctor? Do you think you would save or kill a terrorist if you were a doctor?
21. What will it take for Natalie to psychologically recover from her experience as an agent, from her time with *Saladin* and Safia? To what extent will she be able to reset her previous identity or not? After such a harrowing experience, why does she decide to continue to work with the Office?
22. Discuss the role of grief in the story: Gabriel's grief over his son's death and Leah's torment. Do you think Gabriel can ever be at peace?

23. Why does Gabriel donate the hundred million dollar van Gogh to the Israel Museum? What is the importance of such art in culture, particularly in a time of violence and war?
24. Relegated to the offices and not the field when Natalie is being questioned by Ahmed al-Tikriti, Gabriel wonders if he's not cut out for "the burden of command" at King Saul Boulevard. What new and challenging skills will the position of chief require from him? Will Gabriel make a good chief of the Office? In what ways is "the restorer...restored" or not?